

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

news release

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SEA TURTLE PROTECTION PLAN ANNOUNCED

A comprehensive program under the Endangered Species Act to prevent the extinction of the oceans' largest turtles--some weighing over a thousand pounds--has been unveiled by the Department of the Interior's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) of the Department of Commerce.

The program, announced jointly by Lynn A. Greenwalt, Director of the Fish and Wildlife Service and Richard A. Frank, Administrator of NOAA, will protect green, olive (Pacific) ridley, and loggerhead turtles by largely banning the intentional killing of these animals, prohibiting trade in turtle meat and products, and preserving habitat.

In recent years, dangerous declines in the numbers of sea turtles have resulted from destruction of habitats and commercial exploitation of the animals. Condominium and apartment construction, opening up of new beaches for recreation, and other human activities have destroyed or put pressures on the traditional turtle nesting areas," Frank said. "Moreover, turtle meat is often considered a delicacy, as are turtle eggs, and products made from shell and hides have been in great demand. The survival of sea turtles depends upon lessening these pressures." In addition, Frank noted that turtles are taken incidentally in U.S. commercial fishing operations, particularly the Gulf and South Atlantic shrimp industry.

Frank stated that the new program will provide needed protection for the three species of sea turtles, "permitting them to survive and recover in the future."

The elements of the new program include the following:

--designation of green turtles with breeding grounds in Florida and the Pacific Coast of Mexico as endangered and all other green turtles as threatened;

--designation of olive ridley turtles breeding on the Pacific Coast of Mexico as endangered, and all other olive ridleys as threatened;

--designation of loggerhead turtles throughout the world as threatened;

--a stepped-up effort to develop excluder trawls that will permit fishermen to continue to catch shrimp while reducing the number of turtles accidentally caught in nets;

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--upcoming proposals to designate portions of the Cape Canaveral Ship Canal in Florida and near shore areas of St. Croix, Virgin Islands, as critical habitats (The Fish and Wildlife Service has already proposed critical habitat for the hawksbill and leatherback sea turtles and is in the process of preparing similar proposals for the green and loggerhead.);

--an expanded monitoring program with a view to designation of additional areas for habitat protection;

--a ban on the importation of turtle products from mariculture operations;

--a ban on subsistence taking of sea turtles except for limited taking in the Trust Territory of the Western Pacific.

The effect of the action is to prohibit trade in and the international taking of the three species of sea turtles, except for scientific research, public display, and the limited subsistence take in the Trust Territory. While some incidental taking of the sea turtles may continue in fishing operations, such operations are to be strictly regulated to preserve the species. Commercial interests that will be affected by the regulation include leather goods, food, cosmetics, curio, and jewelry concerns. A one-year grace period will be allowed for interstate commerce to enable dealers, shopkeepers, and others to clear their shelves.

The green sea turtle, perhaps the most commercially valuable reptile in the world, is found in numerous areas around the globe, but has suffered a sharp drop in numbers. For example, the National Marine Fisheries Service scientists believe that the once abundant Florida population has now declined to less than 100 mature adults. The total world population of green sea turtles is believed to be no more than 600,000 adults.

Olive ridley turtles, which are not known to nest in the continental United States, have been taken commercially at the rate of between 500,000 to 1 million annually since the 1960's. In one area of Mexico, 70,000 females were reportedly taken last year from a population estimated to be 150,000. Scientists say that the stocks are beginning to show stress, and that if the take continues at the present rate, stocks may be beyond recovery in as few as 8 years. The olive ridley is hunted primarily for turtle leather.

Loggerhead turtles, like green turtles, are found throughout the world. They are estimated to number between 25,000 and 50,000 in the United States, but are not now in immediate danger of extinction. They are exploited for their meat and for other products.

Three other species of sea turtles, the Kemp's ridley, leatherback, and hawksbill, are already listed as endangered.

The Department of Commerce has jurisdiction over sea turtles from the edge of the water seaward, and the Department of the Interior has jurisdiction on land.